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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W, OKEDIJI AND DAVIS

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SUBJECT: MANO RIVER UNION SECRETARY GENERAL ON RECENT
SUMMIT AND RESPONSE TO FOOD CRISIS, SECURITY

Classified By: Ambassador June Carter Perry for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On May 21, Ambassador Perry met with Abraham Boure, Secretary General of the Mano River Union (MRU). The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the recent MRU summit in Monrovia. Besides Cote d'Ivoire's accession as a full member of the Union on May 15, the most notable outcome of the summit was the decision to create a food security hub in Liberia, which will collect information, devise strategies for addressing crises, and serve as the primary interlocutor with donors and other stakeholders on aid. With regards to peace and security, a Joint Security Committee was established, which will begin regular meetings in June to discuss border security and other transnational issues. Though these plans currently exist only on paper, their development will have implications across a spectrum of issues, including the hoped-for stabilization of Guinea and the structure of food aid to the sub-region as the crisis worsens. The documents outlined below will be sent to Department and MRU member posts via e-mail. END SUMMARY.

MRU RESPONSE TO THE FOOD CRISIS

¶2. (SBU) Secretary General Boure explained that the food crisis and commodities price increases were a priority topic discussed by all delegates, including a special working group comprised of the Ministers of Agriculture. This working group devised plans for individual countries and the Secretariat to address the MRU food security issue. The "Mano River Union's Response to the Current Global Food Crisis" document outlined immediate activities, which include: removing taxes and tariffs on food imports until the end of the 2008 calendar year; removing taxes and tariffs on agricultural inputs for at least five years; allocating at least 10% of national budgets to the agricultural sector, per the 2003 Maputo Declaration, and encouraging the Peace Building Commission (PBC) to make agricultural projects the top priority for financing from its funds. An increased focus on social protection strategies for vulnerable populations and conducting large-scale sensitization campaigns on the causes of the food crisis were also identified.

¶3. (SBU) The most notable long-term activity identified in the response document is the establishment of a food security hub, to be based in and hosted by Liberia. The hub will collate information on each country's food stocks, and coordinate emergency and long-term buffer stocks. The hub will also arrange bulk procurements of commodities for provision to each MRU country and arrange an early warning system on food security. Perhaps the most significant role for the hub is supporting member countries by engaging in discussions with producers, importers, exporters, the private sector, donors, and international financial institutions. These discussions will determine the nature and scope of contributions and establish an MRU food security fund. If the hub is operationalized quickly, any donor support to

ameliorate the ongoing food crisis will have to be structured on a multilateral, rather than bilateral, basis.

PEACE AND SECURITY

¶4. (SBU) Peace and security continues to be a critical issue facing the MRU, given the members, interdependence. Secretary General Boure noted that the current situation in Guinea underscores the fragility of the individual states, and the potential for instability and similar situations to have multi-country impact is high. The porous borders, combined with the general lack of capacity in the security sector throughout the MRU, means that increased tensions or outbreaks of violence, and the accompanying fleeing of people, have spill-over effects to neighboring countries.

¶5. (SBU) To create a mechanism to discuss and address such issues, Secretary General Boure shared that a MRU Joint Security Committee was established at the summit. The "Fifteenth Protocol to the Mano River Union Declaration: Cooperation on Defence, Security, Internal Affairs and Foreign Affairs" document, which Boure shared with the Ambassador, outlined the structure and purpose of the Committee. With representatives from the relevant government ministries participating, the Committee will address border security, consider and advise on policy issues that relate to sub-regional security, and conduct training across the security forces of the MRU states. The protocol document further details that the Committee will be supported by technical committees that address strategic issues and Joint

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Border Security and Confidence-Building Units in cross-border areas that include local representatives from both countries.

THE SECRETARY GENERAL'S VIEW

¶6. (SBU) The Secretary General had a very positive impression of the summit, especially the policy paper on the food crisis, the accession of Cote d'Ivoire to full membership status on May 15, and the decision reached by all states to support at least a partial refurbishment of the Secretariat. While this is an annual event, meetings to address pressing or ongoing issues will take place regularly. Secretary General Boure expressed particular satisfaction that the summit placed special attention on the Secretariat, which has suffered for many years due to Union states not paying their dues. Summit discussions included building the capacity of the Secretariat, which should reinvigorate this once all-but-defunct entity.

¶7. (SBU) Besides appropriate levels of funding, the Secretary General highlighted the need for ongoing technical assistance to the Secretariat. The Ambassador responded that the U.S. is very interested in engaging sub-regionally, and that we will undertake efforts to support the MRU in the interest of regional peace and stability. The Secretary General replied that he will provide a detailed breakdown of the types of assistance they require.

COMMENT

¶8. (SBU) The summit had several positive gains, and renewed interest in the MRU mechanism and its Secretariat is a hopeful sign of increased, organized, sub-regional collaboration and diplomacy. However, the long-term issue of stable funding for the Secretariat remains a question as members contend with their fragile and volatile economies. A further issue is whether or not the momentum of interest from this summit can be maintained.

19. (C) The creation of the food security hub in Liberia, while a logical step for an interdependent group of struggling nations, includes the possibility of centralizing some of the MRU's power in the hands of the Liberian government. Given that the hub will have the task of engaging on issues related to financial and tangible support on behalf of all MRU countries, there is at least some potential for tensions to flair if it is felt that each member is not receiving what it views to be its fair share of the takings. The establishment of this initiative, as well as the Joint Security Committee, will be closely monitored via regular discussions with the Secretary General and his staff. END
COMMENT
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